



Original Research

A grounded exploration of the dimensions of managerial capability: A preliminary study of top Australian pharmacist owner-managers

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Abstract

Background: Australian community pharmacies are experiencing challenges, including government prescription pricing reform and a dramatically increasing competitive environment. Enacting appropriate responsive actions requires capable pharmacy managers. ‘Capability’ implies managing effectively in the present, but with unknown or emerging contexts and with new problems. A conceptual understanding of managerial capability as practiced by pharmacist owner-managers is unavailable in the literature.

Objectives: This research aimed to address the question: *How can we understand managerial capability in relation to effective community pharmacy management?* The study’s objective was to develop preliminary theoretical departure points for continuing research responding to the research question.

Methods: The objective was approached by exploring *how* 5 top Australian pharmacy owner-managers accomplish the management of their businesses in a changing business environment. Qualitative research methods were employed to develop a social process perspective of how the managers enact their management practices. In-depth semi-structured life-world interviews were undertaken as the major method of data collection. Interview text thematic analysis was carried out identifying rich conceptual properties and dimensions, which ‘dimensionalized’ 3 key integrated categories.

Results: The findings show how the managers are immersed in their business, managerial and personal practices in a holistic and relational manner. Managerial processes, reported through three conceptual categories, their properties and dimensions, reveal the highly situational nature of the reality the managers were experiencing, including their need to express their personal/professional identity. The properties and dimensions of the category ‘learning generatively’ in particular, reveal how the pharmacy owner-managers shape their business activities and their emerging context as time passes.

Conclusions: The preliminary interpretive view of managerial capability describes the phenomenon as an emergent human accomplishment rather than a possessed ability. This social process perspective enables the inclusion of context with time. The study acts as a formative departure point for continuing research of pharmacist managerial capability which seeks to better understand the linkage between ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’.

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Keywords: Community pharmacy; Managerial capability; Social process perspective; Properties and dimensions

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Background

With over 5000 community pharmacies owned by individual pharmacists or pharmacist partnerships, community pharmacy in Australia is both a major component of the Australian health care system and the small to medium sized (SME) business sector. Community pharmacy practices are situated in a range of community locations, ranging from shopping centers to town or suburban street retail areas and also medical centers. The provision of health related goods such as prescription medicines, non-prescription medicines, specialized health related goods, as well as other retail products, is typical of almost all pharmacies. In more recent years, pharmacies have been increasingly involved in specialized pharmacy services focusing on the delivery of a range of basic pharmaceutical and health care interventions.¹

Australian community pharmacy, is experiencing a coalescence of several challenges including government prescription pricing reform,^{2,3} a dramatically increasing competitive environment,^{4–6} and generally negative national and world economic factors described by some as “the perfect storm”.⁷ Many community pharmacies are struggling to adapt, as indicated by reports of bankruptcies in the community pharmacy sector rising to levels not seen before.^{8,9} The recurring themes in commentaries and reviews on the sector center on community pharmacy’s need to adapt to emerging health system needs,¹ and competitive forces.⁶

In more recent years in Australia and New Zealand, research has been undertaken to address recognized organizational management deficiencies in the industry’s ability to adapt to changing circumstances. These studies introduce important aspects of management theory and have focused on areas such as organizational change management,^{10,11} organizational capacity building^{12,13} and organizational culture.^{14,15} These contributions have progressed knowledge to assist this industry to adapt to the changing times at the *organizational* level. However, limited research has been conducted into what effective managers at the *individual* level are actually doing to succeed in the emerging environment. Enacting effective and appropriate actions in changing environments requires capable managers.^{16–19} There is limited research exploring *how* effective managers practice their capable management to deliver continuous pharmacy business viability over time.

Capability is about enacting appropriate and immediate responsive action as contextual change

emerges.²⁰ According to Hase and Davis, the concept of ‘capability’, at the level of the individual, emerged from the United Kingdom in the mid-1980’s.²¹ Capability and its potential advantages as a perspective were raised in response to the perceived changing and uncertain nature of work and workplaces caused by an increasingly globalized and interconnected world. The concept is concerned with the ability of individuals to enact appropriate and consistent performance (work or personal) while traversing through both familiar and unfamiliar contexts over time.^{22–24}

The advocates of ‘capability’ as a concept suggest that current operating contexts which are continuously changing and sometimes turbulent create an additional need, beyond, but inclusive of competence.^{23,25} Capability implies managing effectively in the present, but with unknown or emerging contexts and with new problems, and is apparently future oriented.²⁶ Adaptability is central to the concept of capability to respond to emerging change and implies that self-initiated learning is important.^{25,27} Knowing how to learn is considered a major aspect of what it means to be capable.^{28,29} Little if any research has been undertaken to better understand how capable pharmacy managers self-initiate and enact learning in the face of emerging contextual changes.²⁰

Objective

The overarching research question toward which this study is directed is: *How can we understand managerial capability in relation to effective community pharmacy management?* The study’s objective was to develop preliminary and formative theoretical departure points (preliminary theory) for continuing research responding to the research question. The objective was approached by exploring *how* top Australian pharmacy owner-managers accomplish the management of their businesses in a changing business environment. The findings of this preliminary study will be used to guide continuing data collection and theory development through a theoretical sampling methodology.³⁰ The aim of continuing research is to develop a substantive grounded theory of pharmacist managerial capability.

Methods

A qualitative, interpretive approach was employed to develop an understanding of what top

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